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F O R T U N E S W A S H E D A W A Y

"R.F.D."

Broadcast No. 28 in a series
of discussions of soil con-
servation in the Ohio Valley.

WLW, Cincinnati

November 5, 1938 6:00-6:15 p.m.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE
Dayton, Ohio

RRB

SOUND: Thunder, followed by rain...

ANNOUNCER

Fortunes Washed Away!

ORGAN: I GET THE BLUES WHEN IT RAINS.

ANNOUNCER

The hills of Ross County, Ohio, are really small and large plateaus, cut by gorges, separated by valleys. There are poor farms in the highlands, rich farms along the Scioto River. The hillsides are heavily wooded with a protective blanket of oak, walnut, hickory, beech, ash. Along the streams sprawl sycamore, willow, cottonwood. And from one of the many streams that meander through Ross County is a story--the story of an old farm, a good farmer, and a young landlord who doesn't like that word...

ORGAN: THE OLD OAKEN BUCKET.

ANNOUNCER

Nearly four years ago, Charles Allen Smart--Allen to Ross County and you--went back to the scenes of his childhood vacation days, Oak Hill, Ross County, Ohio. He left his work as teacher, and with his wife, Peggy, tried to learn how to farm. One of his teachers was Pete, the tenant of the other family farm a few miles away, on Paint Creek. The time, January, 1937...

SOUND: Three people walking through gravel.

PEGGY

This may have been the farm your people have owned for four generations, but it looks as though the fifth generation had got a gravel pit.

ALLEN

This was it. But you'd never know this field now, would you, Pete?

PETE

It never has been this bad before. Paint Creek has come close to taking this farm away.

ALIEN

I can see that. You could hide a house in that one hole, and all of the holes are in a straight line, right across the best fields.

PETE

Well, I've been farming this place for you folks for about 30 years, now. Paint Creek gets on a tear ever now and then, but not often this bad.

PEGGY

What in the world will you do with all this gravel, Allen? And these rocks! Rocks as big as your head.

ALLEN

My head, Peg? Well, it does feel pretty dense right now.

PEGGY

Anybody's head, silly. But what will you do with it?

ALLEN

Heaven only knows.

PETE

The gravel's about a foot deep along here. This used to be the best land on the farm. Oh, you can sell some of it, maybe; give it away--if you can get anyone to take it. But you'll never get rid of it all.

PEGGY

But there ought to be some way to stop the creek from overflowing.

PETE

It gets pretty mean, sometimes. Back in 1913 it cut off about 10 acres right over there on that sharp bend, and some of these days it's liable to cut clear through here and start another channel.

ALLEN

Well, I'm going to do something. Maybe this Scioto-Sandusky Conservancy District will get started. Maybe the county agent...

PETE

You mean Keeler, Fred Keeler?

ALLEN

Yes, maybe Fred Keeler can tell us what to do. Maybe the CCC camp....This proposition looks a bit too big for you or me.

ORGAN: WHAT'LL I DO.

SOUND: Man tapping gently with hammer against plowshare.

ALLEN (fading in)

What're you doing, Pete? Is it dry enough to plow?

PETE

Oh, hello, Allen, I didn't hear you drive up. Yes, I was starting to put on another plow point....that is, if I can get...this...blamed...thing off.

SOUND: Loud tap, then nut is screwed off bolt, as...

PETE

Just a minute, and I'll be with you.

ALLEN

Go right ahead.

PETE (with sigh of relief)

There!

SOUND: Dog barking.

PETE

Oh, hello there, Geoffrey! That's a big noise from a small dog, even if you have got a big name. How's your nose, pup?.....Well, Allen, what's new?

ALLEN

Well, Pete, I've been following my own nose around. I like a good new idea like Geoffrey likes a rabbit.

PETE (chuckling)

The new ones ain't so hot, and a fellow can't always ketch 'em.

ALLEN

You're telling me! But I've been talking to some of those farmers, like Frank Brown. Now, he knows a good idea when he sees it, and he's been getting some help. So have a lot of others. You see, I'm still trying to get something done about stopping Paint Creek from overflowing.

PETE

Is that why you had those fellows, Walker and Andrus, I think their names were...out here the other day?

ALLEN

Yes, I talked to Keeler, and he suggested that we get in touch with the CCC camp--it's run by the Soil Conservation Service.

PETE

Well, all I can say is, I've been here 30 years without the help of any camp, or any Service.

ALLEN

I know you have, Pete--no room service for you!--and I don't know what in the world we'd ever have done without you. I just hope I'll know as much about farming in 30 years as you do--just half as much.

PETE

Oh, I don't know about that....

ALLEN

Well, you've taught me a lot, and one thing you say is that the land should be conserved. In one way or another, nearly everything that is taken away must be put back.

PETE

Yes, sure, but what's that got to do with the government?

SOUND: Rustling of paper. Dog barks in distance.

ALLEN

Look! Geoffrey's hot after one now! Anyway, Pete, here's the soil conservation plan the camp drew up. They think you've done just about right with this farm for 30 years, but they want to hold us down to fixing that hill pasture. You know, you were talking about that yourself the other day. They're willing to help us, if we'll make our plans definite. That's only fair, isn't it?

PETE

I guess so, but it's a pretty big document, isn't it?

ALLEN

Sure! And five copies to sign. (chuckling) That's one way they save money, believe it or not. I call these papers "our treaty with the United States."

PETE

Treaties don't seem to mean much, these days.

ALLEN

They do when the U. S. A. signs them, and when we do.

PETE

That's just why I'd go slow, Allen. If we're not careful, we'll find ourselves tied down mighty tight.

ALLEN

I don't think so, Pete. These boys were born and raised on farms, mostly, and they know you've got to change your plans sometimes. Of course, if you don't want to sign it, we won't, and the plan can go hang.

PETE

Just what is this plan? From the way you were talking when the men from the camp were up here, all you want is to keep Paint Creek off the place.

ALLEN

That was my idea, at first. But, as they pointed out, and as you know, every field on the farm has some connection with every other field, just as this farm has some connection with neighboring farms. If a man above us grows Johnson Grass, we get some of the seeds, don't we?

PETE

I'll say we do.

ALLEN

Well, these boys can't do everything, but they'll do what they can. They'll level off those holes, and set trees in them. We agree to put a band of permanent sod across the farm above and below the holes. That won't stop the water, but it'll slow it down and make it lose some of its force.

PETE

But what about the rest of the farm? The pastures, and all that?

ALLEN

We haven't farmed that upland for years, but you said yourself the sod needed some attention. And I can see that we've been losing a lot of soil through sheet erosion, just for that reason. If we'll take care of that sod, they'll build check dams to keep that hill where it is. Another thing: you know that steep hillside out back?

PETE

I know the one you mean. It isn't much good.

ALLEN

Well, they'll make it good. They'll cut posts and fence it off, with the rest of the woods, and put in little pine trees. We can use more evergreens out here in the Middle West, and in a few years it'll make you feel good just to look at 'em.

PETE

That wire and seed and fertilizer and all that are going to cost you a lot of money, I'm afraid.

ALLEN

Not as much as you'd think, Pete, and I reckon it's worth it. I may be a dizzy nut, but I think this good soil here--what there is left of it--is worth more than money, means more. And look at these maps: I think they'll help us both to do a better job... that is, if I have a job on this farm.

PETE

Well, one job you have right now is to lend me that pen, to sign. This writing business seems to be catching, like measles.

ORGAN: STARDUST

SOUND: Night scene in front yard of farm. Crickets, locusts.

PEGGY

It's nice out here on the lawn tonight, Allen. What are you staring at? And what are you thinking about? Come on: a penny.

ALLEN

Oh, nothing much, maybe. I was looking at those stars and thinking how old they are. They were there long before there was any soil on the earth, and it looks as though they'd still be there, in good working order, long after the last soil is gone. And there won't be anyone here to look at them, then.

PEGGY

Come off: you're just getting morbid. You start thinking about Paint Creek and the farm, you climb on up to the stars, and you fall back from them into the dumps. You and Pete are doing all you can, aren't you?

ALLEN

Don't forget the CCC boys: they left some sweat up there. And Walker, and Andrus, and all the others. What I wonder is: have we all done anything, really?

PEGGY

You stop looking at the stars, and look at me, and I'll tell you something.

ALLEN

O.K., Boss.

PEGGY

You nut! Stop thinking about millions of years and look under your own nose, now. And what do you see? You see those big holes leveled off, and next year they'll be full of cottonwoods, growing. You see the gullies dammed and the hill pasture renewed. You see a fine beech wood fenced off and 4,800 new pine trees, all growing. You see an old farm run with knowledge and cunning, to save every grain of that soil that can be saved. You see an old farmer and a young city slicker working together with some smart, tough boys who represent the rest of the U.S.A. What more do you want? You leave the stars to their own business. We're minding ours.

ALLEN

I don't see any of that. I see a girl with her eye on the ball.

PEGGY

Well, they do say the earth is almost round.

ORGAN: ON THE GOOD GREEN ACRES OF HOME.

ANNOUNCER

And now, Ewing Jones of the Dayton office of the Soil Conservation Service.

JONES

Thank you, _____. I imagine that thousands of our listeners know that this story of a farm and its people, not forgetting one of its dogs, was adapted from Charles Allen Smart's book, "R.F.D.," published by W. W. Norton & Co. I'm glad that we can carry on with two of the actual characters in this little drama of the defense of American soil. Allen Smart, the young farmer and writer, is with us today. So is Gordon Walker, the superintendent of Camp Ross, which did the work. I'm going to ask Allen Smart first, to keep the plot moving.

SMART

I'm not sure just which plot you mean, Ewing...the plot of "how to keep the soil down on the farm," or how to keep me close to the microphone, and make me talk too much.

JONES

Well, suppose we compromise and make it a mixture of both. Seriously, Allen, how does the soil conservation idea look to you now, after you've been back of it for nearly two years?

SMART

Well now, Ewing, I'll tell you, and I've gladly come 100 miles to say this. It seems to me to be one of the most important ideas that anyone has ever tried to put into effect in the United States, and the Soil Conservation Service seems to me to deserve, quite as much as the Navy, to be called this nation's first line of defense. Writers get too much attention, and the little play that we have just heard has no importance whatever because of its connection with me or any other individual. However, I think it has great importance in that it dramatizes one little episode in a great war that is now going on, all over this country, to defend and save the soil on which our very lives depend. That soil is in great and immediate danger. The Navy is planning years in advance to defend it completely from hypothetical foreign enemies. One great question, of which few people are aware, is simply this: Is there going to be any soil here, and that means any life here, for the Navy to defend? You may think I am a morbid alarmist, and am exaggerating. Please allow me to quote from a very good new book on this subject called Behold Our Land, by Russell Lord.

(Smart continues on next page)

SMART (continued)

In this book, and elsewhere, Hugh Bennett, the Chief of the U. S. Soil Conservation Service, has been quoted as estimating that nearly half of the fruitful land of the United States has been, or is about to be, destroyed. Think it over. How about defending the United States from its closest, most dangerous enemies, ourselves? This is enough talk from a writer and apprentice farmer. I think you will do better to listen to an active officer in this war, my friend Gordon Walker, of the U. S. Soil Conservation Service.

JONES

Gordon, what's the news from the front?

WALKER

Well, Lieutenant Jones, after those splendid remarks by Allen Smart, I hesitate to say anything, except to tell him that we appreciate them, and appreciate them a lot. But as to the news from the front, I have some encouraging news: Ross County farmers have decided to save their soil.

JONES

To what extent are Ross County farmers cooperating with the camp?

WALKER

If you want numbers, here they are: some 120 farmers, operating more than 30,000 acres, are cooperating with the Soil Conservation Service program in the county.

JONES

But, of course, figures don't mean a lot. After all, these farms are serving as demonstrations of what can be done.

WALKER

Encouraging news, there. We find that more and more farmers in the county are picking up, on their own hook, similar soil-saving measures. Strip cropping, contour tillage, stream bank protection, pasture improvement, retirement of steep and eroded lands to pasture and woods--these measures are forming what Allen Smart calls "the first line of defense" of our soil. And that's my report.

JONES

And thank you for it, Gordon Walker, of the Chillicothe CCC camp. If that trend continues, I am sure that the stars will shine on productive soils in Ross County for a long, long time. And Allen Smart, our best thanks to you. It looks, from your vigorous soil-saving efforts, that the "apprentice farmer" is about ready to join the "journeyman" class.

ANNOUNCER

Next week, "The Fall of Calais."

SOUND: Thunder, followed by rain...

ANNOUNCER

Fortunes Washed Away is an educational presentation of the Nation's Station.

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